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"I can't imagine anything more difficult," he said. "I really wanted to see what I was made of." After beginning the trail in 2003, Parker and his former horse, Snokey, crossed Nevada and Utah and stopped for the winter. In

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It was a long, grueling day, and the first words out of Matt Parker's mouth when he stopped on the trail were "I happy ones. It's a terrible road. I can't believe how hot it is."

He was referring to K-68, the highway he was traveling on — by horse — after leaving Pomona State Park earlier that day. Parker couldn't ride his horse, Silver, along the highway because it was too dangerous, so he was forced to back the remaining three miles into Ottawa on foot, Silver by his side. As Parker talked things out with his father, Bill Parker, he offered to give his son a lift into town.

"I don't want you to take me in there, not even a little bit," he said, slightly annoyed that his father even would ask.

Parker reached Ottawa Wednesday night, with the intention of staying the night and leaving town the following morning. But the Kansas weather had other plans. Parker and Silver had to battle the storm that swept through town Wednesday night. After getting into town, the heavy rains made it impossible for Parker to pitch a tent, and the barn where he was staying flooded, forcing him to stay the night at a motel.

In the middle of the night, Parker said he woke up to a painful burning sensation in his feet and discovered a mysterious rash. Doctors couldn't diagnose the rash, so Parker loaded up on ointments and prepared to head out of town.

"Kansas has destroyed me," he said. "This land is supposed to be flat and easygoing, but ... I don't know."

Parker said this was his first time in Kansas and Ottawa. He said Kansas is a hot river and not as much as people make it out to be. Even though there's a lot of space and distance between towns, Kansas isn't exactly flat, Parker said.

"It's rolling. Now Ohio and Illinois — that's flat," he said. And he would know, Parker has seen a lot of land — and had a lot of adventures — in the two years that he has been on the trail: he once was tracked by a mountain lion, broke his back and had emergency surgery because of internal bleeding.

Nothing quite so dramatic happened while in Ottawa, though, and Parker and Silver left town Thursday, heading toward Olathe.

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Riding Silver away

An adventurous man and his horse cross Ottawa's path

By JODIE KRAFFT
Herald Staff Writer

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Matt Parker nuzzles Silver after a Wednesday night of storms and unrest in Ottawa. Parker survives on hospitality and donations from the people he meets. He tries to get people to help put up his horse when he stops while he sleeps in a small tent nearby.

Parker, a 24-year-old adventurer, is about halfway on his journey to be the first person to ride horseback from coast to coast on the American Discovery Trail. The 5,000-mile long trail winds through the deserts and mountains of Utah and Nevada, the Colorado Rocky Mountains, St. Louis, Cincinnati and Washington D.C. Parker started the journey in May 2003 in California, where he was living at the time, and he plans to end up at Cape Henlopen, Del. on the Atlantic Coast.

"Rite of Passage"
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ADVENTURE: On his own

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June 2004, he started out again on a new horse, Little Face, and crossed Colorado and most of Kansas in good winter weather, halted his progress near Council Grove in December of 2004.

Parker and Silver, a tan Appaloosa, began the trail Tuesday after a six-month break. His father, Bill, bought Parker and Silver from Michigan so the pair could pick up where they left off.

"I think it's pretty hard and a little crazy, but I really respect what he's doing," Bill Parker said of his son. He picked a heck of a challenge for himself.

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— Matt Parker, adventurer

Ottawa adventures
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So what keeps him going? Parker paused, a faint smile on his face. "Every now and then things happen," he said. "There are signs that you're on the right path, that people are good and that things are going to work out."

Parker said he has met countless families and individuals along the way who have not hesitated to offer him a place to sleep, a good meal and some pasture for Silver and his previous horses. He has accepted their hospitality, even though he refuses to ask for donations.

Reverb Communications, a media group in California, handles publicity and donations made to Parker. Nicole McGrath, one of Parker's publicists, said Parker's passion for what he's doing shows.

"He's so full of energy, young and passionate about what he's doing," she said. "He's absolutely amazing."

Parker said people who live in urban areas are a bit more hesitant or sometimes hostile when he comes through their property. Rural residents, however, seem to be more friendly and accepting of the what he's trying to accomplish.

"I'm worried that the further east I go, the more skeptical I'll get," he said. "No one still believes that things like this do happen."

To follow Parker and Silver throughout their journey and to see photos from where Parker has been, visit: www.rideoffpassage.com.

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